

# The Briefing



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## Did Christianity really decline?

Kirsten Birkett (<http://matthiasmedia.com/briefing/authors/kirsten-birkett/>) | 1 August, 2005



*The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding secularization 1800–2000*

Callum G. Brown

Routledge, London and New York, 2001, 256pp.

It's an ironic title, is it not? After all, Britain is still, obviously, a place where a mainstream publisher will take on a book which is entirely about the social significance of Christianity and which argues against the assumptions of secularist theory. Moreover, the first chapter, which describes "the Christian churches in crisis", quotes,

less than 8 per cent of people attend Sunday worship in any week, less than a quarter are members of any church, and fewer than a tenth of children attend a Sunday school ... in most [counties of England] the non-churchgoers represent over 90 per cent of the population. (pp. 3-4)

10% in church? Isn't that our *goal*?

Of course, it's not that simple. There is no indication of how biblically Christian these churches are, and any measure will demonstrate that Britain is far less 'Christian' than it has been in past times. Nonetheless, I had to chuckle.

The standard ‘secularist’ explanation of the decline in British Christianity is that this decline is a necessary consequence of the advance of civilization. As Britain became urbanized, industrialized and, in general, better educated and more rational, Christian belief—being inherently irrational—had to decline.

Not so, says Callum Brown. Not that he is a defender of Christianity—he’s a postmodernist and, as such, has succeeded in deconstructing and demolishing the modernist, secularist explanation in a way that (to my knowledge) no Christian scholar has done. The secularist theory, Brown says, was built on rationalist assumptions, not actual historical data. It assumed that religion must decline as civilization advances, and so discovered that this is what happened. Secularist scholars took the rhetoric of nineteenth-century pastors, who were eager to encourage evangelization of ‘the unchurched masses’, and turned this into proof that indeed the ‘masses’ were ‘unchurched’. Also, Brown asserts, the secularist theory depends overwhelmingly on numbers, statistics of church attendance and so on, which Brown acknowledges are useful pointers (after all, he uses them himself in his introductory chapter) but they are certainly not the only, or even necessarily a very good, indicator of people’s religiosity.

Brown is far more interested in personal and societal *discourse*. That is, the way in which people’s personal testimonies reflect religious categories, and the way in which those categories structure public discussion and in turn are reinforced. Regardless of statistics of church attendance and the rhetoric of zealous pastors (who, moreover, were affected by sectarian loyalties), British society was overwhelmingly Christian throughout the nineteenth century in the way that life itself was perceived and constructed. Those who rejected Christianity did so in the categories established by Christianity, and they still analyzed themselves and society in Christian dichotomies. Seen in this light, Brown contends, Britain was as Christian as it ever was up until the 1950s. There was no slow decline consistent with the advance of modern society. The decline was sudden—a phenomenon of the 1960s, when Christian categories were abruptly and decidedly overthrown within the space of a few years.

I have long been sceptical of the secularization theory myself, although not for Brown’s reasons. Mainly I dislike the way in which it ignores the content of what is labelled ‘Christianity’. For instance, many famous ‘anticonversions’ of the nineteenth century, by intellectuals who insisted that their rationality led them to reject Christianity, were not rejections of Christianity at all, but some perversion of it. The ‘evangelicalism’ that George Eliot describes, and which she turned away from as an adult, appears to be an impossibly ascetic moralism. Charles Darwin, the most famous of anti-converts, although trained as an Anglican minister, appears to have been almost entirely ignorant of Christian theology and the content of the Bible.

I also object to secularization theory (and its idea of the ‘inevitable’ decline of Christianity as civilization progresses) in the way that it ignores the deliberate activity of secularists during the nineteenth century. Their activity was political and directed towards the secularist goal; there was nothing ‘inevitable’ about their achievements. Christian categories did not just disappear on their own. They were, in many cases, the objects of deliberate and sustained attack, frequently on (unstated) irrational grounds.

I have now been challenged further by Brown to rethink the secularist theory. In many ways, I realize that I have been guilty of accepting the secularists' story in their own terms; I have not been sufficiently critical of their whole agenda and the methods in which they select data. It is rather humbling that a non-Christian has seen through this attack on Christianity in a way that I never did. Postmodernism has its benefits.

However I still have reservations about Brown's (new) analysis of British Christianity. His definition of Christianity is not structural, as the modernist definition was: it is social, dependent on people's perceptions of themselves and their way of life. This still falls short of a theological definition of Christianity. For this reason, I think he still confuses the issue somewhat. In discussing 'Christian' Britain, most of his examples are moral—the temperance movement, Sabbatarianism, opposition to sport and so on. This is a difficult area, as a Christian conversion will indeed have moral consequences. But Brown does not sufficiently distinguish between what is Christian and what is conventional morality.

There is also the problem of distinguishing between Christianity and Christianized culture. For instance, what do we make of the outpouring of religious romance novels of the nineteenth century? The standard story, as Brown describes, was of a noble Christian woman who struggles against temptation (especially that of the non-Christian man) which frequently resulted in the conversion of the man and ended in blissful marriage. I do not accept the mass consumption of these stories as evidence of a truly Christian society, but rather as evidence of the female taste for romantic fantasy with a Christian flavour.

Even on his own terms, Brown is inconsistent in what he counts as Christian and, especially, as evangelical. (At one point he cites the Barchester novels, George Eliot's *Adam Bede* and Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* as examples of 'evangelical' discourse!) He contends that nineteenth-century piety was conflated with femininity and homemaking, but includes without comment the evangelical practice of sending out single women missionaries. Men's piety, he insists, required men to become feminized, even though he recognizes 'muscular Christianity' as a significant movement.

However it is easy to be critical of details. Brown's overall achievement is impressive. He has successfully challenged a centuries-old modernist theory of religion, and shown it to be inadequate and circular. He has also demonstrated that nineteenth-century Christianity was an intensively active and complex system which cannot be reduced to simple categories. This book has certainly challenged my assumptions, and I hope it will succeed in shaking the modernist complacency about the decline of Christianity that has permeated Western society.